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SUBJECT: MACEDONIA: ELECTION COALITIONS READY FOR MAY 11
CAMPAIGN START

REF: SKOPJE 292 AND PREVIOUS

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) A week before the May 11 official kick-off of the election campaign (reftel), the State Electoral Committee (SEC) approved 19 party lists, including the VMRO-led coalition "For Better Macedonia" and the opposition SDSM-led "SUN - Coalition for Europe." Minority and small parties traditionally allied with SDSM have abandoned the opposition to join PM Gruevski's VMRO coalition. In exchange for generous promises of ministerial positions and special minority rights legislation, Gruevski appears to be trying to accumulate ethnic minority votes that would help him achieve double-majority votes on legislation affecting ethnic minority interests. He also appears to be leaning toward a renewed partnership with his eAlbanian governing partner DPA.

High-level eAlbanian DUI officials have warned that a repeat of the VMRO-DPA coalition would signal a rejection of the will of eAlbanian voters; they have suggested that such an outcome could lead to the "federalization" of the country. A recent opinion poll shows higher approval ratings for three of the big four parties (VMRO, DPA and DUI), while SDSM's approval rating is slightly lower. The clear front-runner, VMRO, is gearing up for a decisive victory. With ODIHR Long-Term Observers deployed to the field and a Code of Conduct signed by over 30 party leaders, most preliminary preparations are over and the parties are ready to kick-off the official campaign season. End summary.

SEC APPROVES 19 PARTY LISTS

¶2. (SBU) On May 5, the SEC confirmed the MP candidate lists of 19 parties, coalitions and independents. The SEC was expected to determine the parties' order on the ballot through a random drawing on May 9. A May 2 SEC decision stipulated that the Supreme Court --rather than the Administrative Court-- would deal with allegations of electoral rights infringements.

¶3. (SBU) The ruling VMRO party has formed the coalition "For A Better Macedonia" with 18 other parties, including 10 minority parties. Opposition SDSM's coalition "SUN - Coalition for Europe" comprises eight parties, including former VMRO allies NSDP and LP. Three prominent NSDP members, including former Minister of Defense Elenovski and former Minister of Economy Rafajlovska, splintered off in protest of NSDP's new coalition arrangement. On the

eAlbanian side, traditional rivals DUI, DPA and (the much less influential) PDP were joined by the newly-formed DUA in submitting candidate lists.

SMALLER PARTIES GRAVITATE TOWARDS PRESUMED VICTOR

¶4. (SBU) In a May 7 meeting with PolOff, Democratic Party of the Turks (DPT) President Hasipi stated that, after six years in coalition with SDSM, the DPT was hesitatingly joining the VMRO coalition and "choosing the lesser of two evils." Less-than-elated with his new coalition partner, Hasipi admitted that VMRO had given him a good deal: he received a high position on the candidate list and a promise of a Minister position in the new government.

¶5. (SBU) Democratic Party of Serbs (DPS) President Stoilkovic told us May 8 he had left his traditional coalition partner SDSM, after 17 years, with the help of a good "incentive package" from VMRO. In exchange for his participation in VMRO's coalition, Stoilkovic claimed he had secured a guaranteed MP seat for himself; chairmanship of a promised new agency on minority rights; one deputy minister position; "several directorships of public enterprises;" and MFA slots for "two foreign-educated sons of DPS members." Probably overestimating his influence in the coalition, Stoilkovic said he had asked Gruevski to delay Kosovo recognition by a few months. He added that he had warned Gruevski that, as soon as Macedonia recognized Kosovo, he would leave Parliament in protest.

¶6. (SBU) Boris Stojmenov, President of VMRO-Makedonska and
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owner of influential Kanal 5 TV, told PolOff May 8 it was "quite natural" that his party had joined Gruevski's coalition. Admitting that "some in the coalition have been pressing me to make Kanal 5 a VMRO party channel," Stojmenov asserted he would not succumb to the pressure. Stojmenov interpreted Gruevski's promise to give him the Minister of Economy job as evidence of Stojmenov's influence over Gruevski, while playing down the role his TV station may have during the campaign season.

GRUEVSKI GEARING UP FOR A BADINTER MAJORITY WITHOUT DUI?

¶7. (SBU) Gruevski's "For A Better Macedonia" coalition includes one Turkish, one Serbian, two Bosniak, one Vlach and five Roma parties. The coalition seems certain to win at least six minority MP seats in the next Parliament. That, in addition to DPA's MPs, could help secure for Gruevski the Badinter (double) majority of ethnic minority MPs he needs to pass some laws. The big question remains how many of the still undecided eAlbanian votes DPA will win. VMRO-Makedonska's Stojmenov said Gruevski's recent public support for DPA was meant "to help DPA get more eAlbanian votes," but cautioned that it would be "bad for the country's security" if Gruevski again chose DPA as a governing partner.

DUI RAISES THE SPECTER OF FEDERALIZATION

¶8. (SBU) Unhappy with these developments, DUI President Ahmeti said at a May 7 rally that, if VMRO chose as a partner the eAlbanian party that received fewer votes (presumably DPA) than the eAlbanian front-runner (presumably DUI), that would mean that "the eMacedonians, and not we, are making decisions about our future." DUI's election headquarters chief went even further, confirming on May 8 to EmbOff that he had told the Kosova Press Agency that "if the eMacedonians ignore the eAlbanians' political will, that may lead the eAlbanians to look for a different political and societal organization, including federalization."

¶9. (SBU) The Social Democratic Party of Macedonia (SDPM) has stirred up passions here. Clearly intended to mislead SDSM (the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia) supporters, the SDPM list has candidates with similar or identical names to those of the SDSM-led coalition (e.g. Rada Sekerova (SDPM) against Radmila Sekerinska (SDSM); Zoran Zasev against Zoran Zaev, etc). This trick was relatively successful in the 2006 elections when SDSM lost 3,500 votes in District 4 in Southeastern Macedonia, in addition to 1,500 invalid ballots, all because of confusion with the clone SDPM. Widely believed to be supported by VMRO, SDPM has been attacked by the media, who located some of the SDSM "doubles," most of them unemployed or elderly, and who are at best dimly aware of their political role.

VMRO, DPA AND DUI UP IN OPINION POLL

¶10. (SBU) A May 5 opinion poll by the local Democracy Institute showed approval for VMRO was at 29.2%, higher than a few weeks ago, while SDSM's 9.8% rating was slightly lower. According to the same survey, both DUI and DPA increased their support, from 9.9% to 10.8% for DUI, and from 5.1% to 5.7% for DPA. Not surprisingly, Gruevski is still the most trusted politician, with 29.5% approval, followed by DUI's Ahmeti at 11.2% and President Crvenkovski at 7.5%. The Democracy Institute survey showed SDSM's Sekerinska, with her 3.2% approval rating, trailing even behind DPA's Thaci at 4.5%

ODIHR OBSERVERS DEPLOYED; NDI CODE OF CONDUCT SIGNED

¶11. (SBU) ODIHR HOM Ambassador Barry briefed IC principals May 6 that ODIHR Long-Term Observers (LTOs) had been deployed earlier that day. LTOs, and observers of the Macedonian NGO MOST will liaise in the field, while LTOs are preparing

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ODIHR's interim report on the political situation before the elections. Unlike in the past, ODIHR will have only limited local IC support, with approximately two teams per bilateral mission. In addition, two parliamentary delegations will take part in the monitoring: one from the Council of Europe, and one from OSCE's Parliamentary Assembly.

¶12. (SBU) In a highly-publicized event in Parliament May 8, more than 30 party leaders signed the NDI Code of Conduct for free and fair elections. Organized under the motto, "We Can and We Must. Fair Elections 2008," NDI Country Director Henshaw described the campaign as "a clear signal to party activists and supporters that Macedonia must have fair elections."

COMMENT

¶13. (SBU) On May 7, MOST accused "the four big parties" (VMRO, SDSM, DPA and DUI) of having violated the election regulations by starting their campaigns before the official May 11 start. The parties' response was to redouble their efforts in preparation for the rapid deployment of their campaigns as soon as the official signal is given this weekend. Violent incidents are still isolated and with no casualties. Disconcerting reports of nightly shooting in the predominantly eAlbanian Skopje municipality of Cair are seen as related to the elections.

NAVRATIL